

THE OTHER HO CHI MINH TRAIL: Seaborne Infiltration during the Vietnam War

by

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INTRODUCTION

A lot have been said about the success of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Vietnam war that the benefactors of the trail - the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front Army, or more popularly known as Viet Cong (VC) in the South looked back to it with a sense of legendary.¹ The trail was a series of routes used by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV/North Vietnam) to infiltrate men and equipment into the Republic of Vietnam (RVN/South Vietnam) during the Vietnam War. The initial goal was to overthrow the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in the South and to unify the country. Even though the trail had only become important for North-South communication and infiltration after 1954, Vietnamese scholars like to trace the history of the trail to as far back as 1946 when the Viet Minh (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh/Vietnam Independence League) was operating against the French. The trail, which was then known as the Truong Son Trail, was responsible in keeping North-South com-

munication open in the Viet Minh's efforts to elude detection by the French Army.² The partition of Vietnam into two halves by the Geneva Accord of 1954 however, gave the Truong Son Trail a whole new meaning. Since then, the nature of operation was to focus on penetrating men, equipment and war materials into the South.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was first put into operation in 1959, after the DRV leaders decided to return to a strategy of revolutionary war in the South. Started primarily to transport men and equipment down from the southern provinces in the DRV through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into the RVN, the trail eventually developed into a complicated network of trails, paths, roads, and waterways with stopping stations, storing cache and field hospitals. From the north the trail extended down the Truong Son mountain range in southern Laos and Cambodia. The success and effectiveness of the trail against the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the United States (US) armed forces in the RVN was tremendous. Not only were the infiltrators succeeded in wresting control of vast area of land and population from the RVN Government in Saigon, it had also contributed to the changing the public opinion in the US against the war, especially after the 1968 Tet (Lunar New Year) Offensive. Thanks to the trail, the DRV and the Viet Cong were able to launch massive attacks against the ARVN and the US troops from within the heart of the RVN-US controlled areas. The lethal effect of the trail also caused the US and the RVN in spending great amount of monies, and lives trying to destroy the network of trails, even to the extent of invading Cambodia in 1970.

This essay however, aims at looking at another trail that had co-existed with the famed land Ho Chi Minh Trail, one that operated along the coast of Vietnam - a Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail. By so doing, it is hoped that the significance of the trail to the war effort of the PAVN and Viet Cong could be gauged more accurately. This paper also wish to trace the origins and organisation of the route. Attempts will be made to examine the various sub-routes that had emerged from this Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the extent of the contribution of the network to the success of the DRV in the Vietnam War. Lastly, this paper will also look at the struggle to keep it open on the DRV's side, and the ARVN-US efforts to destroy it.

ORIGINS AND EARLY OPERATIONS

The Geneva Accord of 1954 resulted in the de facto partition of Vietnam into two different nations. In the northern part of the 17th parallel north, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was formed with a communist government led by Ho Chi Minh; and in the South, a non-communist regime was led by Ngo Dinh Diem with the support of first, the French, and later, the US. Both Vietnams however, did not fulfill their obligations under the armistice agreements of 1954, especially in regards to the presence of foreign troops. In this case, the US advisors for the RVN, and the communist stay-behind party for the DRV. At least five to ten thousand former active Viet Minh partisans stayed behind in the South, their stay was encouraged by Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Victor of Dien Bien Phu to act as the vanguard in the process of unification.³ The DRV also since the concluding of the agreements began a propaganda campaign to instigate resistance in the South against the Saigon Government. Even though the Viet Minh did carry out anti-Diem activities, their efforts were more political than military. The move towards an active-direct military involvement in the South came about in the late 1958 and early 1959 when Hanoi's political and military partisans began to advocate, with substantial encouragement from Beijing to increase involvement in the South. Le Duan, Ho Chi Minh's associate, a southerner also advocated stronger support for the tactics of anti-Diem partisans, especially after his two years tour of the South. The Lao Dong (Workers') party approved the military policy at the 15th plenum of its Central Committee in May 1959. An organisation to infiltrate support to the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) was created. At the same time, a command and control mechanism belonged to the DRV's National Assembly Reunification Committee was also established; it was to become the famed Central Office in South Vietnam (COSVN), operating deep in the RVN.

Immediate plans to infiltrate men and equipment to the South were arranged. The organisation responsible for this task was called Group 559, after the date of the 15th plenum (May 1959). Three sections were created inside Group 559, each responsible to infiltrate through land, sea, and Laos/Cambodia respectively. The bulk of the infiltrating operation however, were carried out mainly through the Truong Son region bordering Laos and Cambodia. The usage of Laotian territory was not new in the military strategy of the DRV. The Viet Minh had made use of the mountain region in Laos as their operating areas during their war against the French, particularly in the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The infiltration on the mountainside was further reinforced

two months later by the formation of another infiltration unit that operates along the Vietnamese coast.

The Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail began in July 1959 when the politburo of the Workers' Party Central Committee instructed party organizations in the South to send boats to the DRV provinces North of the DMZ to fetch weapons. The organisation responsible for this operation was the Group 759, after the date of the directive. The action was mainly prompted by the realization of the fragility of the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the mountain range side, and the need to transport men and heavy equipment to the coastal provinces of the RVN. The terrain on the mountain range was too strenuous to go through, especially in transporting heavy equipment, further more tropical diseases were not uncommon. The long period needed to bring down men and equipment through the land trail also prompted the action. The sea route is faster and relatively safer for the transportation of men and equipment to the RVN provinces along the coastal area.

The first of such operations was implemented in the late 1961 when five wooden boats from the RVN provinces of Ben Tre, Ca Man, Tra Vinh, and Ba Ria arrived at the northern coast to collect supplies for the Viet Cong in the South.⁴ The success of this first operation led to the decision by the Ministry of National Defence in Hanoi to carry out infiltration by sea in a regulated manner. Group 759 was later to become the Maritime Transport Command, and was commanded by Rear Admiral Tran Van Giang. Early operations were mainly carried out by sailing junks under the guise of fishing boats that frequented the coast of Vietnam.

Unlike the land Ho Chi Minh Trail, which primarily concerned with the infiltration of men, the seaborne operation's priority was to move heavy supplies from the North, with occasional technical personnel, and espionage agents. The vicinity of Dong Hoi, Vinh, Ha Tinh, and Do Son beach in Haiphong were the main departure points for the boats carrying supplies to the South. The great distance of Haiphong from the DMZ demonstrated two points. First, the bulk of the supplies were imported from abroad through Haiphong, which were later transferred to smaller boats for the infiltration process. The large amount of Chinese, Soviet, and Eastern Bloc origin weapons and equipment captured by the ARVN and the US troops lend support to this point. Secondly, Haiphong and Vinh are the industrial centres of the North, thus, the transportation of materials could be easily carried out compared to other southern provinces in the DRV.

Besides its more emphasized role as a material supply route, the Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail also transported personnel to the South. The number of personnel who had used the sea route however, remained small, but constituted the bulk of the technical and political cadres, as well as agents who had accompanied the supply of weapons and materials. The overwhelming odds against those who infiltrated by land, especially in risking encounters with ARVN-US patrols and air strikes were the main reasons why technicians and trained personnel were infiltrated by sea routes, which were relatively safer compared to the land routes. In the early stage of the war for instance, a Viet Minh travelling down from the North using the Ho Chi Minh Trail would need at least 5 weeks before he could reach the northern part of the RVN,⁵ whereas the sea route would normally only take a week.

MODE OF OPERATION

In the seaborne operations, all crews on board were usually given false identity cards, and fishermen's permits, the RVN voting cards, and draft cards, or military discharge papers. The captain of the craft will receive a boat registration book, crew lists, and several South Vietnam permits to conduct business. Personnel who were transported were usually given some training in boat and fish handling, so as to be able to pass as legitimate fishermen,⁶ they were also given and memorized background stories to strengthen their disguise.

The seaborne infiltration process from the North to the South involved three stages. First, the preparation stage which involved the training of personnel, and the acquisition of transportation and materials. Secondly, to transport the men and supplies down to the South, and the receiving process for these supplies; and finally, the distribution stage where men and materials were distributed to their final destinations.

The case of Nguyen Vit Duong, though only one of the thousands who came down by the sea route would help to shed some lights on the first stage of such operations. Duong, a southern-born DRV intelligence agent who was captured by the ARVN in July 1962 was taken out from the Central Research Agency of the DRV in 1959 to be trained in radio transmission and codes. Supplied with false identity card, he was flew from Hanoi to Dong Hoi to infiltrate into the South by sea, with the principle task of setting up a cell of agents to collect military information for the Viet Cong.⁷

The process also involved seamanship training, at least at the rudimentary level, to enable one to disguise temporary as a fisherman. All these were carried out at the designated ports prior to departure to the South. The province of Thanh Hoa was the main training centre which provided training in political, propaganda, and military affairs.⁸

The preparation for the seaborne infiltration also involves the purchase of junks from South Vietnam, as well as in the DRV.⁹ The acquisition of southern sailing junks were done through the Viet Cong, and sailed to region North of the DMZ to receive the shipment of men and equipment. The deployment of southern vessels was part of the camouflage plan to avoid detection by the ARVN navy and airforce. In the early stage, most of the southern boats were sailed to the Vinh Linh area just North of the DMZ to receive their loads. But as the US aerial bombings were growing heavier in the region between 17th and 20th parallel North, more ports and naval bases further North were used for this purpose.

One very important point to note at this juncture is that, just like its overland counterpart, the bulk of the agents who traveled down to the South by sea were southerners, who had moved to the DRV in 1954 under the provisions of the Geneva Accord. Until 1964, it was estimated that a total of 40,000 to 90,000 out of 150,000 former southerners returned to the South through the infiltration process.¹⁰ The infiltration of southerners at this early stage can be understood through both political and military strategy. Politically, the deployment of native southerners instead of northerners was meant to play down the North's role in directing over Viet Cong operations in the South, as well as to portray a situation where the southerners were actually fighting for their own motherland, and that the whole affair was a war of liberation conducted by the South Vietnamese themselves, and not an act of aggression from the North. Militarily, the infiltration of former southerners would diminish the chances of being discovered by the ARVN as compared to the northerners who had a different accent in their spoken Vietnamese language.

This situation however, changed in early 1964 especially after the source of southerners went dry in the North. Thus began the phase of direct North Vietnamese infiltration and participation in the war in the RVN. This development was first detected in 1964 when an estimated 75% of the more than 4,400 Viet Cong who are known to have entered the South in the first eight months of 1964 were natives of North Vietnam.¹¹ Subsequent infiltration, either by land or sea were dominated by North Vietnamese.

The second stage was the actual infiltration. The process of seaborne infiltration were being carried out quite openly into the RVN as most of the crafts were legally existing, having purchased earlier by the Viet Cong in the South, and were registered with the RVN Marine Department. Early operations were mainly carried out by sailing junks under the disguise of fishing boats that frequented the coast of Vietnam. The first wooden motor boat was first reported used in October 1962.¹² Although the RVN Navy and Marines conducted patrols in the DMZ area, the infiltration were generally successful, mainly due to the composition of the crews who were essentially southerners who had received necessary training prior to their departure. This was reinforced by the various camouflage preparation on the vessels. One captain of such vessels who was captured in 1963, confessed to have made 15 trips down to the RVN with supplies within three years. If such confession is accepted to be true, the operation can generally be considered a success, as each successful trip could supply the Viet Cong with more than 100 tons of arms, ammunitions and food.

The process of transporting supplies down to the RVN were carried out in at least four routes, with destinations at the Quang Nam-Danang area, Quang Ngai, Qui Nhon-Tuy Hoa regions (Binh Thuan & Binh Thuy Provinces), and the Mekong Delta. Later, the Viet Cong at these destinations would distribute the supplies to other inland destinations.

The normal capacity of a boat used in such operation is about 100 tons. A successful ARVN-US interception on 16th February 1965 along the coast of Phu Yen Province resulted in the capturing of a huge cache of arms, ammunition, and other supplies. A primary survey of these supplies and weapons actually put up an impressive, as well as amazing list:

- one million sticks of grenade
- 500 pounds of TNT in prepared charges
- 2,000 rounds of 82mm mortar shell
- 500 rounds of 57mm recoilless rifle ammunition
- 500 anti-tank grenades
- 1,000 rounds of 75mm recoilless rifle ammunition
- one 57mm recoilless rifle
- two heavy machine guns
- 2,000 7.95mm Mauser rifle
- about 100 7.62mm carbines

1,000 submachine guns
15 Light Machine guns
500 rifles
500 pounds of medical supplies.¹³

Altogether, a total of 100 ton of supplies were seized from this operation. One can imagine the size and effect of the total quantity of supplies that went through undetected by the ARVN-US forces.

The third phase of the operation is the receiving and distribution process which also marked the end of a single seaborne infiltration operation. There were three components involved in this phase, namely, the receiving, storage, and distribution. Most receiving points for the seaborne operation were mangrove and hilly areas that are situated some distance from the port cities, and RVN establishments, but near to the numerous inland waterways to facilitate distribution. The boats were met by the local Viet Cong at the appointed time, and once the cargoes were unloaded, the boats will immediately set sail for the DRV again. The unloaded cargoes were then transferred to hiding places for storage. Most caches were situated near to the unloading points. This was meant to await for orders prior of distribution to their final destinations, and also to avoid unnecessary alarm to the local authorities.

The ARVN-US forces usually discovered large caches of weapons, and equipment in clandestine hiding places near to vessels seized or sunk by them. In one such case at Cape Varella near to the town of Tuy Hoa in the province of Phu Yen on 17th February 1965, a total of 918 rifles, 48 Czech-made sub-machine guns, and 50 automatic rifles were found in some caves near to a vessel sunk by the ARVN-US forces. Large quantity of weaponry and ammunitions were also found on the sunken vessel,¹⁴ which suggest the cache at the caves were stored earlier, and probably for a considerable duration.

The constant encounters with the numerous caches of infiltrated weapons and supplies near to these vessels prompted the US official analysts to make an appraisal in 1965 saying:

While the discovery indicates the likelihood that similar large shipments may increase, it is believed that they have been coming all along. The South Vietnamese Navy is ineffective as a blockade force and allowed wide gap in the coastline for the clandestine infiltration of enemy agents, cadre,

weapons, and supplies. It seems probable that supplies and a considerable portion of communist manufactured weapons are being introduced into South Vietnam via the sea route.¹⁵

ARVN-US EFFORT TO COUNTER THE SEABORNE INFILTRATION

The alarming figure of 140 seaborne infiltration cases detected between July to December 1961 prompted the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) to suggest to the Government of Republic of Vietnam to reorganise their naval force to counter these infiltration.¹⁶ The RVN had only 80 sailing junks, none of which were motorized, thus obviously ineffective to conduct sea patrol, especially when the North Vietnamese began using motorized junks for the infiltration since October 1962. A military assistance fund from the US saw the commissioning of 500 new junks into the RVN Navy, mainly for routine sea surveillance activities to combat the infiltration process.¹⁷

With a force of 600 to 700 junks surveilling its coastal area, the RVN Navy conducted search on vessels sailing in this area. In the last eight months of 1963 saw them searching 130,000 junks and 350,000 people; and 149,000 junks and 570,000 people for the first seven months of 1964. The search of 1963 however, only yielded 140 agents, which was not even 1% of the total number of persons searched. This reflected the difficulties faced by the RVN Navy to close the gaps along the 800 miles sea coast.

Even though the seaborne infiltration process went on, the 'small success' of 1963 and 1964 prompted the RVN Naval forces to move further North, endeavouring in finding the source of the infiltration, some of these operations actually went beyond the DMZ into the DRV territory. Such action prompted the question of escalating the war into the DRV. This was evident in the operation Code-named 34A which was an RVN Naval effort in shelling Hon Me and Hon Nieu, two DRV islands suspected of being the source of seaborne infiltration as well as being radar stations. The operation was carried out by the ARVN two days prior to the outbreak of Tonkin crisis, where two US destroyers, *USS Maddox* and *Turner-Joy* were alleged to have been attacked by DRV naval forces.¹⁸ Although the US Secretary of State at that time, Robert McNamara, denied the association of Operation 34A with the Gulf of Tonkin Incidents, it is clear that such action could have caused the DRV to be alarmed by the presence of US destroyers, suspected of assisting the RVN Navy in bombarding the two islands earlier.

The persistent and unceasing flow of Viet Cong agents and materials via the sea as demonstrated by the discovery of large caches of such supplies at the coast of Phu Yen Province in February 1965 again prompted US initiative to take a firmer action in countering the seaborne infiltration. General Maxwell Taylor, the US Ambassador to Saigon was instructed to put forward suggestion to the new government of Prime Minister Dr. Phan Huy Quat to request US assistance in countering the North Vietnamese seaborne infiltration effort.¹⁹ Quat complied by signing a Decree Number 81/NG on 27 April 1965 for the defence of the RVN territorial waters. The decree stipulated the conditions for regulating the flow of traffic in its territorial waters, and gave a list of items banned from entering the RVN without official approval. The main item of the decree however, was a statement of RVN having requested and obtained from the US Government naval assistance and cooperation to "enforce the new security and defense measures as ordered by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam."

The request was responded by the setting up of Task Force 71 under the charge of the US 7th Fleet command to implement operation code-named Market Time, a surveillance operation to monitor junks sailing along RVN coast, and to enforce a tight blockade of the coast against the landing of Viet Cong agents and supplies. This operation was in a way, an expansion of the earlier junk force of the RVN Naval force, only this time with direct US involvement including the use of US personnel, vessels, aircraft, as well as battle ships. The function of Operation Market Time was removed from the US 7th Fleet Command on 1 August 1965, and was assigned to a newly created Coastal Surveillance Force.

Operation Market Time was complimented by operation code-named Game Warden that was initiated as its riverine counterpart. The US military planners was able to identify the various stages of operation of the DRV seaborne process that they introduced Operation Market Time to counter the main infiltration along the coast, while Operation Game Warden would cover the distribution stage for the infiltration along the many inland waterways.

For this purpose, surveillance centres were set up at strategic points including An Toi, Danang, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, and Vung Tau. These centres served as parking bays for ARVN-US vessels conducting surveillance activities, and had radio contact facilities. Specialized ships were brought into service, complimenting, and replacing the old sailing and motor junks. These ships

ranged from the big radar picket ships (DERs), former destroyer escorts released from their former service. These DERs would eventually become the floating headquarter ships for patrol crafts conducting activities off shore.²⁰ Smaller and faster vessels were used for conducting surveillance activities. One of such was the 50-foot 'Swift' type patrol craft which had an armament of twin .50 calibre machine guns on the deckhouse, and a combined .50 calibre, and 81mm mortar aft, and were crewed by an officer and five men. A total of 104 new 'Swifts' were commissioned after proven to be an effective craft. Two other type of crafts were tried, but proved to be unsuitable for the purpose. These include the 164-foot Asheville (PG.84) class aluminum-bulldog gunboats, and the hydrofoil Tucumcari (PGH.2).

Towards the end of 1965, patrol aircraft were assigned to monitor the movement of junks and coordinating information to the watercrafts to intercept suspicious junks. The P-5 Marlin seaplanes were first used for this purpose, and was joined by P-34 Orion, a land-based aircraft. The Marlins were used for surveilling the coast from Vung Tau to Phu Quoc Island off the Cambodian coast, while the Orions from Vung Tau to the 17th Parallel. The Marlins were later replaced by the land-based P-2 Neptune, operating from Ton Son Nhut Airport at Saigon, and Cam Ranh Bay.²¹

The success of these operations however, remained small. The large number of junks (about 1,000) moving along the coast, and the river daily limited the operation to a random chance of identifying clandestine crafts carrying Viet Cong agents and supplies. These success include the bombing of a fleet of suspected Viet Cong junks on 24 July 1965 where 23 junks were sunk by US destroyers.²²

As a means of countering both the land and seaborne infiltration from the DRV, ARVN-US forces began carrying out air strikes against military targets in the North. Operation Rolling Thunder was launched in March 1965, and would eventually last until 31 October 1968. In the first twelve weeks of bombing from mid March 1965 till 10th June 1965, a total of 32 targets of strategic importance to the seaborne infiltration process were bombed. These include various bridges and highways leading to Dong Hoi, and Vinh Linh, the main departure points for the seaborne infiltration, as well as military and supplies depots in these cities.²³ Heavy aerial bombings were also carried out against clandestine transshipment facilities and watercrafts. In May 1966 for example, four transshipment facilities and 1,400 waterway crafts were bombed in the military region IV

of the DRV. A further 600 were destroyed or damaged on a new infiltration route from Vinh to Thanh Hoa.²⁴

Despite the early optimism expressed by US policy makers, the effectiveness of aerial bombing in breaking the fighting spirit of the North Vietnamese in supporting the war in the South, and to infiltrate agents and supplies to the Viet Cong however, achieved very limited success.²⁵ The air strikes had no doubt created difficulties for the North Vietnamese, but with the availability of Chinese and Soviet assistance, and almost unlimited labour to replace and reconstruct damages, the strikes had very little effect on the capability to carry on infiltrating men and supplies to the South.²⁶ The futility of the bombing on the DRV and its ability to support military operations in the RVN was the conclusion of a study conducted by the US Institute of Defense Analyses:

As of July 1966 the US bombing of North Vietnam had had no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the south at the current level . . . Since the initiation of the Rolling Thunder program the damage to facilities and equipment in North Vietnam has been more than offset by the increasing flow of military and economic aid, largely from the USSR and Communist China.²⁷

Thus it was clear that the seaborne infiltration was considered a threat that need to be overcome, and the various efforts initiated by the US and the RVN government lent support to its importance in the course of the Vietnam conflict. The multi-million dollar programs and operations launched by the ARVN-US armed forces in countering this operation did not justify the cost spent on the various programs, this was especially so in the aerial bombings. Operation Market Time however, achieved better results, but unmatched to the determination of the North Vietnamese to continue infiltrating men and supplies down to the South via the sea.

DRV EFFORT IN CONTINUING THE SEABORNE INFILTRATION

The importance of the seaborne infiltration lies with its ability to transport heavy equipment. The discovery of large calibre arms ammunitions including mortars, recoilless rifles, and heavy machine guns by ARVN-US armed forces clearly demonstrated this point. Perhaps the most shocking discovery that further reinforced the vitality of this route was the 100 pieces of 75mm artillery

shells captured on 25 July 1964 from a Viet Cong motorized sampan in Co Chien River that separating Kien Hoa and Vinh Binh provinces in the Mekong Delta.²⁸ The discovery may indicate the presence of 75mm howitzers which weight 1,400 lbs each, and were sent down via the sea route. The US-made howitzer were used in Burma and China during Second World War, and could fire a maximum range of 9,620 yards, which means the Viet Cong could now actually fire upon ARVN-US positions without risking of being discover.

The importance of the sea route also lies in the short period of time needed to transport men and supplies to the South. It normally takes less than a week using the sea routes compared to up to 90 days overland trip.²⁹ The need to keep this route open right from its early stage in the DRV to the final distribution process in the RVN became part of the Hanoi war effort.

The first of the numerous effort was to secure safe landing points. The political propaganda effort carried out by the Viet Cong cadres in the rural areas of the RVN has wrested a substantial area of land and population from the Saigon Government. An estimate given by the Secretary of Defense in 1964 listed the provinces of Kien Hoa and Phuoc Thuy as having Viet Cong control over at least 50% or more of the countryside. (Kien Hoa-90%, and Phuoc Thuy- 80.5%) while the other 41 provinces in the RVN have about 40% of the countryside under Viet Cong control.³⁰ The control of such a vast area of territory also mean that the Viet Cong would reduce the risk of encountering ARVN-US forces while landing and distributing their men and supplies. There were reports on Viet Cong attempts to secure coastal area in Military Region V to facilitate seaborne supply to this area.³¹

At the source of infiltration, the bombing of strategic and military points did not hamper the continue flow of materials and men from the North into the RVN. Despite the daily air strikes by the ARVN-US air forces, the determination of the North Vietnamese, and the continuing material support from the Eastern Bloc nations, particularly the USSR, and China, helped Hanoi to sustain the sending material and human supplies to the South. The ability of the North Vietnamese to rebuild their damage in a short time helped to off set the losses sustained. This also involved the resilience to improvise the damage. One such case was the Thanh Hoa bridge in the DRV, where the North Vietnamese engineer had built a pontoon bridge beneath the damaged bridge, and supplies continue to flow down South using the bridge.³²

The launching of Operation Market Time and Game Warden by the ARVN-US armed forces did have their effect on the seaborne infiltration process. The operation was able to reduce the number of seaborne infiltration cases, at least from Washington's point of view. There was a decline in the number of seaborne infiltration from late 1965 to early 1967, the success was attributed to the effectiveness of Operation Market Time.³³ There were reports that the Viet Cong's main problem in 1967 was the lack and loss of supplies. For example, over 30 tons of rice was lost by the Viet Cong in the Quang Ngai Province in July 1967, a result of ARVN-US forces sweep.³⁴ Nonetheless, beside the camouflage efforts and the disguise as fishermen tactics, there were not much other evidence suggesting North Vietnamese effort in countering Operation Market Time.

The seaborne infiltration picked up again in mid-1967, after lying low for the past one and a half years. The capture of more materials by the ARVN forces in 1967 suggested the picking up of infiltration activities which the US defense analysts interpreted as Viet Cong effort to replace losses sustained, as well as to overcome the problem of lack of supplies.³⁵ By 1967, the Viet Cong needed 215 tons of logistic support daily, of which 35 tons was food.³⁶ The increasing seaborne infiltration cases should be seen as part of the build up for the launching of the Tet Offensive in 1968. Indeed, the ability of the Viet Cong to sustain fighting against the ARVN-US forces during the Tet Offensive helped to confirm this point.³⁷

CONCLUSION

The seaborne infiltration were carried on after 1968, but at a much lesser scale as suggested by the relatively less reports on such cases in the US side. But it continued to play an important role in Hanoi's war effort in the South. During its 14 years of operation from 1961 to 1975, a total of 152,870 tons of weapons and other supplies were claimed to have been sent down via the four sea routes used by the DRV, together with 80,000 political agents and cadres as well as combatants.³⁸ And during the General Offensive of Spring 1975, all available vessels were mobilised to ferry men and supplies down to the RVN for the final assault. All together, two units from the Group 759 were made Hero Units by the DRV. Three ships and five officers and combatants of the infiltration unit were also proclaimed as heroes of the People's Armed Forces.³⁹

The importance of the Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail or rather seaborne infiltration in the history of the Vietnam War needs to be examined more exten-

sively. Such an attempt would only be possible with access to the archives of the People's Army of Vietnam, as well as detailed military reports of the various RVN Military Regions, and US Navy operating in Vietnam. Until then, this attempt by utilizing fragmental sources would remain a study of exploratory nature.

NOTE

- 1 Until recently, there are not many works being done on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. From the Vietnamese side, see Dan Hong, Duong Thi Xuan et al., *The Ho Chi Minh Trail*, Hanoi: Red River (Foreign Language Publishing House), 1982; see also Duy Duc, Colonel, "The Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail", *Vietnam Courier*, No. 6, 1985.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- 3 Initially, both Ho and Giap were hoping for a political victory in the South, especially for the proposed 1956 nation-wide elections. By having a sizeable number of supproters in the South, Ho and Giap hope to turn the balance on their political rivals, John F. Cady, *The History of Post-War Southeast Asia*, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974, p. 310.
- 4 Duy Duc, "The Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail", *Vietnam Courier*, No. 6, 1985, p. 19.
- 5 Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, London: Penguin Press, 1982, p. 347.
- 6 US, Department of State, *Aggression From the North: The Record of North Vietnamese's Campaign to Conquer South Vietnam*, Washington D.C., 1965, pp. 9, 12 & 13.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 10 Jon M. Van Dyke gave the figure at 40,000, see Jon M. Van Dyke, *North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival*, Palo Alto, California: Pacific Books, 1972, p. 34. The official records mentioned at least 90,000 South Vietnam Viet Minh troops moved to the North in 1954, US, Department of State, *Aggression from the North.*, p. 11.
- 11 US, Department of State, *Aggression from the North*, p. 11; See also CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Communist Military Posture and Capabilities vis-à-vis southeast Asia", SC No. 05789/64, 31 December 1964, p. 3.
- 12 Duy Duc, "The Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail", *Vietnam Courier*, No. 6, 1985, p. 19.
- 13 US, Department of State, *Aggression from the North*, pp. 18-19.
- 14 The weapons and ammunition found on the craft are: one 12.7mm Soviet machine guinea, one 57mm recoilless rifle, and between 2,000 and 3,000 Chinese-made individual weapons. See CIA Weekly Report, "The Situation in Vietnam as of 20 February 1965", OGI No. 00772/65, p. 31.
- 15 CIA Weekly Report, "The Situation in Vietnam as of 24 February 1965", OGI No. 0608/65, p. 7.

- 16 "Transcript of the Rusk-McNamara Appearance before the Joint Committee's Session", 6 August 1964 in Excerpts from the Executive Session on the Southeast Asian Resolution.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 "Gulf of Tonkin, the 1964 Incidents Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations", US Senate, 20 February 1968.
- 19 "Telegram from secretary of State to Ambassador Taylor in Saigon", 2 April 1965.
- 20 John S. Bowman, *The Vietnam War: An Almanac*, New York: World Almanac Publication, Bison Book, 1985, p. 427.
- 21 John S. Bowman, *Ibid.*, p. 428.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
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- 38 Duy Duc, "The Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail", p. 19.
- 39 *Ibid.*